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## Ricoeur's concept of distanciation as a challenge for theological hermeneutics

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# RICŒUR'S CONCEPT OF DISTANCIATION AS A CHALLENGE FOR THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

## INTRODUCTION

As the title of our conference suggests, its aim is to concentrate our attention, in Ricœur's hermeneutics, on the dimension of poetics in connection with religion. I propose to put a specific accent on the concept of 'poetics': I would like to interpret it in the sense of 'poiesis', creativity, creative fulfilment. To reformulate the topic, I propose to ask the following question: which are Ricœur's categories for interpreting and understanding the poetical aspect of religion? For me as a theologian, this question represents an important challenge to theological hermeneutics, even if Ricœur was very careful in connection with theology as a global discipline, and especially with systematic theology! He was more open-minded for biblical hermeneutics, where it is possible to be closer to texts. He seemed to be afraid that the systematizations of the systematic theologians could kill the poetical dynamics at stake in the biblical texts<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, I will try to cope with the poetics of religion from the point of view of theological hermeneutics, trying to seize it as a challenging issue not only for biblical scholars, but more generally for theologians in different theological disciplines, including systematic theology!

My hypothesis is that the central aspect in the poetical dimension of religion is the movement of distanciation. This is directly connected to Ricœur's hermeneutics because, in my feeling, this concept is a main concept in Ricœur's hermeneutics as a whole<sup>2</sup>. For that reason, my starting point will be an article first published in English in 1973 about *The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation*<sup>3</sup>. The first part of my paper will be devoted to a presentation of the main perspectives of this hermeneutical function of distanciation. In a second part, I will then try to reflect

1. For Ricœur's fear about too strong systematizations in theology, see: *Herméneutique de l'idée de Révélation*, in *La révélation*, Bruxelles, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1977, 15-54.

2. I tried to show this importance of distanciation in an introductory article to Ricœur's work: P. BÜHLER, "Als Leser finde ich mich nur, indem ich mich verliere": Zur Einführung in die Hermeneutik Paul Ricœurs, in *Theologische Zeitschrift* 62 (2006) 399-419.

3. P. RICŒUR, *La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation*, in *Du texte à l'action*, 101-117 (in my own English translation).

about the role of distanciation in the poietics of religion. Finally, in the third part, my aim will be to give some examples how what I shall call 'the poietics of distanciation' can be a challenging issue to different theological disciplines.

In my first part, I will stick to Ricœur, and even more precisely, to only one of his many articles, but to a main one; in the second and third part, I'll be going on distance a little bit, making a kind of distanciation from Ricœur, to use his concept of distanciation more freely, in my own way, in the context of theological hermeneutics. In some way, I am going to use Ricœur's hermeneutical category of distanciation in a metaphorical way for showing how it can help to grasp and to understand main aspects of religion and theology.

## I. THE HERMENEUTICAL FUNCTION OF DISTANCIATION

### 1. *Underlining a Difference with Gadamer's Hermeneutics*

Ricœur begins his article with a short discussion of Gadamer's conception of distanciation. For Gadamer, distanciation is mainly perceived negatively, as a downfall, as alienation, destroying participation that expresses itself primarily by a belonging. For this reason, there is in Gadamer a constant struggle between belonging, as the fundamental situation of understanding, and distanciation, perceived as a negation of this belonging. Therefore, as Ricœur stresses, Gadamer's title *Wahrheit und Methode*<sup>4</sup> expresses a radical alternative: truth cannot be experienced with the help of a method because a method always puts things on distance, leads to an objectivation hindering precisely the happening of a real experience of truth. As Ricœur once said in another article: "The question is then to which point the book deserves to be called: *Truth AND Method*, and if its title should not rather be: *Truth OR Method*"<sup>5</sup>.

In contrast to Gadamer, Ricœur wants to develop a positive conception of distanciation by concentrating on the phenomenon of the text. In this perspective, the text becomes a fundamental model for human communication in its historicity. It reveals "that it is a communication in and through distance". From that point of view, distanciation gets a "positive and productive function"<sup>6</sup>. In connection with the topic of our confer-

4. *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (1960), in H.-G. GADAMER, *Gesammelte Werke*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, <sup>5</sup>1986, pp.?.

5. *La tâche de l'herméneutique*, in *Du texte à l'action*, 75-100, p. 97.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

ence, we could say: a *poietical* function, and my aim is to discover this *poietics of distanciation*, especially for religion and theology.

## 2. Five Steps of Distanciation

In his article, Ricœur develops this argument in five steps, five successive experiences of distanciation helping progressively to deepen the hermeneutical reflection.

The *first distanciation* happens through performing language as a discourse. A discourse is unique as a historical event involving a speaker and listeners in a concrete situation. But at the same time, it transmits a signification through language as a general issue. Signification, mediated through language, gets into the event of this particular discourse. Without being reduced to this event, transcending it at the same time, it becomes a concrete communication through the happening discourse. Therefore, this concrete discourse represents a first step in creating distanciation.

The *second distanciation* happens by performing the discourse as a literary work. The speaker becomes an author impregnating his or her work with specific characteristics. In this way, through the creative activity of his or her composition, the author produces distance by giving to his discourse a specific style, by entering it in a literary genre, etc. So, as a work, the message gets objective structures that can be analyzed by different methods of interpretation<sup>7</sup>.

The *third distanciation* is connected to the phenomenon of writing: when the author becomes a writer, his or her word gets another status: the text acquires autonomy in regard to its author: "what the text signifies doesn't coincide with what the author wanted to say"<sup>8</sup>. It has now its own destiny. Therefore, at the same time, the addressee also changes. Disconnected from the concrete situation of a discourse, the text can be read by every person that is able to read it, in this language, with this vocabulary, etc. That distanciation, creating a distance between the text and its author, opens new conditions for understanding.

The *fourth distanciation* is to be found in the *reference* of the text by establishing a second degree's reference to the *Lebenswelt* of the reader. In the romantic hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, Dilthey), the text was reduced to be mainly an access to its author, in his or her geniality. This way is no more possible if the text has its own destiny of reception. But that does not oblige us to concentrate simply on the analysis of the text's

7. These methods can be connected to the effort of *explanation* as well as the effort of *comprehension*. As it is well known, Ricœur strives to overcome Dilthey's opposition; see *Expliquer et comprendre*, in *Du texte à l'action*, 161-182.

structures, like in the text theories of the structuralism. In the text, there is a 'Sache' (in German), a 'chose' (in French), and it can be understood as a new perspective on the world that the text offers to its reader. In that way, the text goes on distance in regard to the 'normal', everyday-world, the *Lebenswelt*, proposing its own world to the reader. To express this dimension, Ricœur speaks of the 'text's world'. That means: the world that the text deploys, discloses, so that the reader can find in it new possibilities of being for his or her existing in the world, leading indirectly to new possibilities of action, as A. Thomasset has shown<sup>9</sup>.

That leads us to the *fifth distanciation*: if the text offers new possibilities of being, it is a mediation for our self-understanding. The sentence has often been quoted: "Understanding means understanding ourselves in front of the text"<sup>10</sup>. In classical terms, it is the well-known topic of appropriation or application. But in this fifth step, there is also a dimension of distanciation. The appropriation cannot happen through a direct seizure. Understanding happens not by imposing our effort to understand, but by exposing ourselves to the text and getting from it new possibilities. The text takes us away from ourselves, puts us on distance in regard to ourselves, in order to bring us back to ourselves. To quote another famous sentence with a biblical tonality: "As a reader, I find myself only by losing myself"<sup>11</sup>. From this point of view, "comprehension is as much disappropriation as it is appropriation"<sup>12</sup>, or we could say: appropriation happens only in and through expropriation. Therefore: "At all levels of the analysis, distanciation is the condition of understanding"<sup>13</sup>.

There is clearly a circular structure in the hermeneutical function of distanciation: through disappropriation to appropriation, through losing to finding, etc. As Boyd Blundell underlines<sup>14</sup>, this movement of detour and return is fundamental for Ricœur. It has to do with the structure of the hermeneutical circle, or maybe better: the structure of a *hermeneutical spiral*, because the reader does not return to the same point, but gets back transformed. To avoid the impression of a *circulus vitiosus*, Ricœur

8. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

9. See his contribution in the present volume.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117: "Dès lors, comprendre, c'est *se comprendre devant le texte*". It has to be stressed here as an important accent for Ricœur: comprehension happens in front of the text, and not by going *beyond*, or *behind* the text, as it is often the case in classical hermeneutics (for example in the allegory).

11. *Ibid.*, p. 117: "Lecteur, je ne me trouve qu'en me perdant".

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.* This is the last sentence of the article.

14. See his contribution in the present volume.

himself has suggested this idea in his theory of narration, proposing that the 'circle of *mimesis*' could be understood as an 'endless spiral'<sup>15</sup>.

### 3. *A Progressive Deepening, from the Discourse to the Reader*

By following the five steps in the article, we could fulfil a progressive deepening in the perception of distancing. It leads us from the discourse over the text and its world to the appropriation of the reader. Is it possible to use the hermeneutical function of distancing for understanding the phenomenon of religion? Could the little *hermeneutics of distancing* that Ricœur develops in this article be a kind of key for a little *hermeneutics of religion*? That's the question I would like now to discuss in my second part.

## II. DISTANCIATION AS A POIETICAL DIMENSION OF RELIGION

### 1. *Religion – 'relegere'*<sup>16</sup>

In a descriptive way, we could define religion as a system of symbols including different representations, beliefs, rituals, institutions, values and rules regulating the relationship of human beings with transcendence. But from a hermeneutical point of view, we must do more than just describing: the aim is to interpret, to understand the central nerve of religion as a specific way for a human being to live in responsibility. Therefore, my question is: could this central nerve of religion be the movement of distancing? To answer this question, it may be useful to go back to the etymology of the concept of religion. Since Antiquity, this etymology has been in discussion. Many, as for example Augustine, have understood religion from the verb 'religare': to connect, to put in a relationship. But already Cicero proposed to see the root of religion in the Latin verb 'relegere'. Composed with the verb 'legere', this verb means literally: to read again, but also to recollect, to reassemble, to resume. For Cicero, there is a dimension of respect, of veneration in this recollecting, in this resumption. Some-

15. See *Temps et récit I*, p. 111: "À cet égard, j'aimerais parler plutôt d'une spirale sans fin qui fait passer la méditation plusieurs fois par le même point, mais à une altitude différente".

16. For this part of my argument, I refer to G. EBELING, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens I*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1979, pp. 111-139 ('Glaube und Religion'), and *Evangelium und Religion*, in G. EBELING, *Theologie in den Gegensätzen des Lebens* (Wort und Glaube, 4), Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1995, 27-43.

thing is vital for me and so I take it up again and again, appropriating it more and more, in a religious veneration that impregnates my whole life.

## 2. Kierkegaard's Concept of Repetition

The same dimension of re-reading can also be found in Kierkegaard's work. Constantin Constantius, one of his pseudonyms, has developed the category of repetition in a very similar way in his book *Gjentagelsen* (1843)<sup>17</sup>. It doesn't mean just repeating things in a naïve sense, but taking life up again, in the struggle with a crisis. For the young man of Kierkegaard's fiction, it is a love crisis. The biblical character illustrating this concept of repetition is Job, losing everything in a radical trial of his faith and, by going through this trial, coming back, recovering his life, his world. In a very similar way, we could think of another biblical character having a great importance for Kierkegaard: Abraham, in the trial of sacrificing his son and then coming back home with him, as told in Genesis 22 and reflected by Kierkegaard in *Frygt og Bæven*<sup>18</sup>. We could also think of the nightly fight of Jacob in Genesis 32 and of the way he leaves the place at daybreak, limping but blessed!

The 're-' of re-ligion, as re-reading, re-collecting, re-suming, indicates that a double movement is accomplished, going and coming, losing and finding. Like the biblical characters that Kierkegaard is interpreting, through repetition, I am torn away from myself, from my daily life, my world in the sense of my *Lebenswelt*, and I'll have to find the way back to me, or better: I'll be brought back to me. This double movement that we discover here is very similar to what has been described in the first part as the movement of an appropriation through expropriation, so that we could vary slightly Ricœur's sentence and say: "As a believer, I find myself only by losing myself". So the believer gets close to the reader in the situation of distanciation: an interesting fact, if we remember that 'religio' could come from the verb 'relegere', re-reading ... I'll come back soon to this point. But we have first to clarify where the root of this double movement is to be found.

17. *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, volume 4, København, Fags Forlag, 1997, 5-96; for the French translation: *La répétition*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Orante, volume 5, 1972, 1-96.

18. *Ibid.*, 97-210; for the French translation: *Crainte et tremblement* in *Œuvres complètes* (n. 17), 5, 97-209. This book, written by another pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, was published on the same day as *Gjentagelsen*!

### 3. *Distanciation in the Relationship between God and Human Being*

As we have seen before, there is a dimension of transcendence in religion. In the Christian perspective that is ours here, we can express it by speaking of the relationship between a human being and the God in which he or she believes. This relationship is not just one relationship among others in human life: it is the relationship to the ultimate instance of life, making everything else in this life penultimate. Standing in front of God, or, in the sense of Genesis 32, struggling with God through the night, means experiencing a radical distanciation from all other things that characterize 'normal' human life, *Lebenswelt*. As for the text's world in the hermeneutics of distanciation, we could say in this hermeneutics of religion: in the meeting with God, there is another world deploying itself, another world opening unknown possibilities of being. So Job, Abraham, Jacob, or we can come back to our world with a new perspective, in a new light, transforming the everyday-world out of a crisis of faith, love, and hope.

### 4. *Religion and Relecture*

Religion as a 're-movement' means that in his or her coming back from the experience of being confronted with the ultimate instance, the believer will be enabled to cope with daily life, his or her 'Lebenswelt' in a new way. In the terms of Ricœur's later theory of narrative, we could say that, out of a mimesis II, as a *configuration*, a mimesis III, a *refiguration*<sup>19</sup>, can take place in the movement back to 'normal' life, making this 'normal' life different, renewed, and inspired by new possibilities. In this way, sticking to the connexion of religion and the Latin verb 'relegere', we could say that, in a hermeneutical perspective, religion is a *relecture*<sup>20</sup>: coming from the meeting with God, the human being can understand himself or herself differently, recollect, reassemble, and resume life in a new light.

And as for Kierkegaard's concept of repetition: this double movement may, must be repeated. Because going through expropriation, appropria-

19. See *Temps et récit I*, pp. 109-129.

20. In biblical exegesis, the concept of relecture is used for characterizing a literary procedure, especially in the gospel according to John, consisting in the addition of successive commentaries; for this theory, see J. ZUMSTEIN, *Kreative Erinnerung: Relecture und Auslegung im Johannesevangelium*, Zürich, TVZ, 2004; A. DETTWILER, *Die Gegenwart des Erhöhten: Eine exegetische Studie zu den johanneischen Abschiedsreden (Joh 13,31–16,33) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihres Relecture-Charakters*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995.



tion is never done for ever, but happens again and again. The certainty of faith is never in a safe shelter, but is constantly assailed in the struggles of life. As we have seen above, that movement has not to be a vicious circle: it can be interpreted as a *spiral* helping to deepen the experience of faith. In Luther's theology, we may understand in the same dynamic way his accent on the fact that the believer is constantly *simul iustus et peccator*<sup>21</sup>.

That could be exactly the *poietical*, the productive, creative power of distanciation: to hold faith and life tense, and therefore alive. In this way, we may say that there is a 'poietics of distanciation' in the depth of religion. But let's be precise: I am not saying that every distanciation is religious. As we have seen in Ricœur's article (part I), there are many other types of distanciation. But I am stressing that every religious existence contains a movement of distanciation. In his rereading of Kant's philosophy of religion, Ricœur characterizes this dimension by underlining that religion is fundamentally a reply to the problem of evil<sup>22</sup>. Against evil, religion expresses the 'in spite of' of hope<sup>23</sup>.

### III. POIETICS OF DISTANCIATION AS A CHALLENGE FOR THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

What I tried to develop in my second part as a 'religious poietics of distanciation' has also important implications for the theological work in its different disciplines. Because distanciation is the central nerve of religion, it belongs also to a poietical, creative working in theology as a responsible interpretation and comprehension of religion. That happens always in a specific tradition, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, etc. In my second part, I have spoken generally of a hermeneutics of religion. If it has to be deepened in a theological hermeneutics, it must be now clearly named as a poietics of distanciation in a specific faith and, connected to this faith, in a specific theology. In my case here, it is the Christian faith and theology.

I would like to add two preliminary remarks:

21. G. EBELING, *Theologie zwischen reformatorischem Sündenverständnis und heutiger Einstellung zum Bösen* (Wort und Glaube, 3), Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1975, pp. 173-204.

22. See *Une herméneutique philosophique de la religion: Kant*, in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, 19-40. The article is divided in two parts: *Le mal radical* (pp. 22-27) and *La réplique de la religion* (pp. 28-40).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 27. That stresses the central meaning of the problem of evil in Ricœur's hermeneutics.

1. As Ulrich H.J. Körtner has underlined in his book *Einführung in die theologische Hermeneutik*<sup>24</sup>, theological hermeneutics is not only important for the biblical studies; it goes through all different theological disciplines, helping them to stay at their common task. For that reason the aspects I want to explore in this third part are chosen in different disciplines of theology.

2. In 2008, several catholic theologians in have been commemorating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998). In some way, this third part will also be a small protestant contribution to this commemoration.

# 1. "Theology is Necessary for Making the Task of Proclamation as Difficult as Necessary"

I start with a general perspective that has to do with *fundamental theology*. Theology as a whole is not a speculative, theoretical science, but has, as the Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as well as Schleiermacher in the 19<sup>th</sup> century underlined, a practical orientation, and it gets its real sense only from this connection to a praxis<sup>25</sup>. It has its place in university as such a practically oriented science, like other academic disciplines. In this way, we can say that theology as a whole is devoted to a concrete task: Gerhard Ebeling has formulated it, from a hermeneutical point of view, as the task of proclamation (*Verkündigung*) in its various forms<sup>26</sup>. By working in its different disciplines on the language of faith in the past and in the present situation, theology helps all the persons that are responsible for proclamation. But with some irony, Ebeling introduces a moment of distancing: the help doesn't consist in making the task easy, in relieving the responsibility. As he says in an article about the necessity of theology: "Theology is necessary for making the task of proclamation as difficult as necessary"<sup>27</sup>. Of course not as difficult as possible, but as difficult *as necessary*! What happens in the event that Ebeling called 'Wortgeschehen', literally 'happening of word', is vital and therefore

24. *Einführung in die theologische Hermeneutik*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006. In this book, Körtner presents hermeneutics as a task for every theological discipline.

25. For the bibliographical references, see G. EBELING, *Praktische Theologie*, in *Studium der Theologie: Eine enzyklopädische Orientierung*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1975, 113-129.

26. See *Theologie und Verkündigung: Ein Gespräch mit Rudolf Bultmann*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, <sup>2</sup>1963.

27. G. EBELING, *Wort und Glaube*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, <sup>3</sup>1967, p. 447.

must be treated as a demanding task, struggling constantly with the hermeneutical difficulties of this 'happening'<sup>28</sup>.

## 2. *Proclaiming God as 'adversarius noster' (Luther)*

From what we just have developed, we can deduce an important indication for *practical theology*. To think about the concrete forms of proclamation in the sense of Gerhard Ebeling is especially the task of practical theology (that's probably why Schleiermacher considered that discipline as being the crown of theology as a whole<sup>29</sup>). What makes the task of proclamation a necessarily difficult one has to be understood as a constant challenge of language in its constant try to reach adequately its addressees.

In his hermeneutical articles, Rudolf Bultmann has proposed to treat this problem as a dialectic of fastening and opposing, *Anknüpfung und Widerspruch*<sup>30</sup>, seeing the discourse of the apostle Paul on the Areopagus in Acts 17 as a fundamental model. Taking the altar that was dedicated to the unknown God as a starting point, Paul fastens his proclamation at the religiosity of the people of Athens: "I see that in every way you are very religious" (Ac 17,22). But at the same time, he leads them to a very precise God, the God in which he believes, and that's the moment of the opposition: "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (17,23). The reaction of the Athenians will be: "We want to hear you again on this subject" (17,32). In other terms, as Bultmann says: the comprehension of God's alterity, as a *Deus extra nos*, or as Luther once said: the comprehension of God as an 'adversarius noster', as our adversary, is only possible if it can be connected dialectically, by fastening and opposing, to the precomprehension of God that is already present inside the human beings. That's the challenge of appropriation through distanciation in the proclamation of God's word. On that point, there is a great proximity between Ricœur on one side and Bultmann and Ebeling on the other, bigger than the proximity with Barth.

28. For the concept of *Wortgeschehen*, see *Wort Gottes und Hermeneutik*, in *Wort und Glaube*, 319-348.

29. F.D.E. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Kurze Darstellung des Theologiestudiums zum Behuf einleitender Vorlesungen*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, (1910), <sup>4</sup>1993, p. 10 (§31 of the first edition).

30. *Anknüpfung und Widerspruch*, in *Glauben und Verstehen II*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, <sup>3</sup>1965, 117-132.

### 3. '*Lectio difficilior*': *Exegesis as Expropriation*

As we have seen in our part I, for Ricœur, appropriation through distancing happens mainly in front of texts: understanding a text is exposing ourselves to this text, so that we can understand ourselves in the light of the text. Or, as Ebeling once underlined in a very similar way: the interpretation of the text by the interpreter comes only to its end when the interpreter is interpreted by the text<sup>31</sup>. In this sense, the special challenge of the *exegetical disciplines* is that in their working on the texts, they let constantly happen this movement back to the interpreter as first addressee of the text. With Ricœur, in our days, we can easily observe different exegetical methods trying to focus on the historical situation of the author and the addressees, on the argumentative or narrative structures, on the history of reception, etc. During years, Ricœur was in an intense dialogue with the biblical scholars working in these different fields. Hermeneutically, all these methods are legitimate if they don't try to domesticate, to tame the text, but if they help the interpreter to expose himself or herself to the text, letting it work in its alterity to us. The same danger occurs in the case of an interpretation of the Bible claiming to have the status of an official depositary, in the name of church tradition or of the illumination of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, playing with the words, we can say that *exegesis* should be constantly *expropriation* in Ricœur's sense: *expropriation of the text* and *expropriation by the text*. This task is a hermeneutical version of the old philological rule of the '*lectio difficilior*'.

### 4. '*Wirkungsgeschichte*' as an *Experience of Distanciation*

Since Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*, working on the history of efficiency, the history of interpretation and reception<sup>32</sup>, has become an important issue, also in theology. It is doubtlessly a legitimate task, and it helps to understand the fundamental historicity of our work as interpreters. But once more the problem can be what we aim at with such an option. Historicity can be understood in different ways. In Gadamer's hermeneutics, this point concerns the question what is meant with the fusion of the horizons. Since for him distancing is mainly negative, as an alienation, the history of efficiency could be understood as a way to overcome this disturbing distancing. In Ricœur's perspective, historic-

31. *Theologie und Verkündigung*, p. 15: "Im Umgang mit dem Text schlägt das Ausgelegtwerden des Textes um in ein Ausgelegtwerden durch den Text".

32. See *Wahrheit und Methode*, especially pp. 270-312.

ity means rather experiencing distancing in a radical way and holding fast in this distancing, against a too fast fusion of the horizons. Therefore, I wouldn't speak of a fusion of horizons in Ricœur's hermeneutics, as Dan Stiver has done<sup>33</sup>. If appropriation happens through distancing, the distance between the different horizons must be preserved and not surpassed.

Distancing in the *Wirkungsgeschichte*: that could be the hermeneutical challenge for *church history*. This discipline has often been tempted by constructing a big History, sustained by a theology of history helping to reduce the alterity of time. Coping with distancing would mean rediscovering concrete historicity in the depth of our big Histories, our master narratives. I agree with Lieven Boeve<sup>34</sup> when he stresses that historicity in a deep sense is only possible if our narratives constantly stay situated, rooted, and therefore open.

In contrast with this option, we may say that the encyclical *Fides et ratio*<sup>35</sup> also has its big History, its master narrative: until high Middle Age, everything is fine; at the apogee, we find Thomas Aquinas; then everything until today goes wrong. To use the terms of the Regensburg discourse of Benedict XVI<sup>36</sup>: after the ideal 'hellenization' of Christianity comes the catastrophe of a 'dehellenization', favoured in three successive waves by Protestantism (Reformation, enlightenment, liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). In my feeling, in such a 'master History', historicity as a concrete experience of distancing is stifled.

### 5. *Fides et ratio: A Lack of Distancing or a Lack of Theology of the Cross*

My next point is in the field of *systematic theology*, as well for *dogmatics* as for *ethics*. I choose the main topic of the encyclical *Fides et ratio*: the relationship between faith and reason. As we have seen in the previous point, the encyclical opposes the ideal time of deep conformity between faith and reason to the bad time of rupture between them, of

33. See his contribution to the present volume.

34. See his contribution to the present volume.

35. Enzyklika *Fides et ratio* von Papst Johannes Paul II. an die Bischöfe der katholischen Kirche über das Verhältnis von Glaube und Vernunft, p. 14. September 1998 (Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, 135), Bonn, Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, 1998; versions in different languages can be found on the website of the Vatican ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).

36. See *Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections* (12<sup>th</sup> September 2006) on the website of the Vatican ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).

them falling apart. This vision of history leads the document to put a strong accent on the peaceful cooperation of faith and reason. It's just not possible (or not allowed?) that they enter in concurrence, in fight with each other. To say it in a polemic way: things must be arranged so that it cannot happen. But, even if the encyclical tries explicitly to avoid that danger, it means that both lose their autonomy, or at least that they must stay in a clearly delimited autonomy that doesn't break their interdependency. Because the falling apart must be avoided, cost what it may.

For me, this way of thinking is a good illustration for what happens in the case of a lack of distancing: the interaction gets tamed, paralyzed, and in my feeling, there is no more creativity. If the relationship has to be vivid, faith and reason must be enabled to struggle with each other. There is a third way between rigid conformity and rigid falling apart: it's the vivid interaction of two dimensions giving each other to think again and again<sup>37</sup>.

Ricœur's hermeneutics can learn us how to cope with the productive relationship of two opposed aspects: in his whole work, he tried to create dynamic interactions between the voluntary and the involuntary, the teleological and the archaeological approach, the conviction and the critique, the fictive and the historical narration, identity and alterity, and once more: appropriation and distancing.

As Luther especially underlined, in a Christian perspective, such interactions are connected with the dash between the world's wisdom of the message of the crucified Christ. Reading the encyclical as a protestant, I was wondering if the document would speak about the foolishness of the cross that frustrates the wisdom of the wise in the first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul's *theologia crucis*. In fact, §23 is dealing with this topic, quoting Paul's argumentation. But the section finishes with the remark that Paul's message "is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. Here we see not only the border between reason and faith, but also the space where the two may meet"<sup>38</sup>. That means the end of the theology of the cross, and it never reappears in the whole document. So the lack of distancing has to do with a lack of *theologia crucis*.

37. See P. BÜHLER, *Faillie, conformité ou dialogue critique? Une approche systématique des interactions entre science et foi*, in P. BÜHLER – C. KARAKASH (eds.), *Science et foi font système: Une approche herméneutique*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1992, 73-94.

38. *Enzyklika Fides et ratio* (n. 35), p. 28.

## 6. *Assailed Certainty as the Condition of the Theologian*

I'd like to conclude my series of reflections with an aspect that belongs again, like the first one, to *fundamental theology*. Considered from a hermeneutical point of view, theology is an open, quite risky effort. But the idea is not quite the same in the encyclical *Fides et ratio*. The adjective 'hermeneutical' occurs four times, but always in a more or less negative way: it has to do with the dangers of relativism, scepticism and subjectivism. In contrast with this critical approach of hermeneutical conscience, the encyclical speaks from the beginning to the end, with an incredible evidence of *the* truth, the absolute, the unique, the definitive, the objective truth. Even if it starts in its introduction with the Socratic *gnothi seauton*, "Know yourself"<sup>39</sup>, it seems to ignore that there is a task of appropriating truth and that appropriation is also disappropriation, expropriation. As Lieven Boeve stressed<sup>40</sup>, truth cannot be grasped in an objective way; it is always connected to an attestation, and therefore from an open point of view, engaging subjectivity. On the contrary, the encyclical conceives theology (and philosophy at the same time) without the trouble of having to cope with distanciation in the quest of truth. Presupposing "the desire to reach the certitude of truth and the certitude of its absolute value", the encyclical underlines: "Whether we admit it or not, there comes for everyone the moment when personal existence must be anchored to a truth recognized as final, a truth which confers a certitude no longer open to doubt"<sup>41</sup>.

Reading that on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, I cannot avoid to think of the way Luther assaulted years ago the false certainties of his time in his 95 theses against the indulgencies. Ricœur doesn't speak much about Reformation, but in his hermeneutics of self, Luther's famous sentence "Here I stand. I cannot else" plays an important part<sup>42</sup>. It appears as an adequate sentence for expressing assailed certainty. In my feeling, the only possible condition for the theologian is such an *assailed certainty*, a certainty that struggles again and again with the distanciation of doubt, bearing witness to the truth in a personal attestation. It is also the condition for creative work to be done in theology.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-11 (§§1-6).

40. See his contribution to the present volume.

41. Enzyklika *Fides et ratio* (n. 35), p. 32 (§27).

42. See *Soi-même comme un autre*, especially pp. 198, 391 and 405-406.

## CONCLUSION: IS THE HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEM SOLVABLE?

My conclusion will be short. "The hermeneutical problem exists, of course; but it is solvable". That is a short quotation from the last paragraphs of the encyclical *Fides et ratio*<sup>43</sup>. Is the hermeneutical problem really as easily solvable? The answer is: yes, if we neglect, reject, deny the everlasting, or better: the ever and ever returning distancing in all its varieties. Therefore, at the end of this paper, my answer is, against the encyclical: no, it is not as easily solvable. If it would, then there would be no more need for conferences on *Poetics and religion*! But that would be also the end of a vivid, creative theology and philosophy!

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43. Enzyklika *Fides et ratio* (n. 35), p. 97 (§96).



